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Towards National-Popular
Notes on Self-Respecters' Tamil

M S S Pandian

This article intends to free the language question in Tamil Nadu from the stigma of being dubbed 'anti-national' in the nationalist narrative, and make available alternative ways of imagining politics based on the national-popular will. The article cites the anti-Hindi agitation launched by the Self- Respect Movement in 1937 as a movement where national-popular will found its articulation in mobilising a spectrum of subalternities in support of Tamil.

The vernaculars are written down when the people regain importance. [Gramsci 1985:168]

I
Introduction

IN the pan-Indian national imagination, Tamil Nadu often figures as a space of 'linguistic insubordination'. Among other things, the continued resistance of the region to the imposition of Hindi, which began as early as the 1930s, as well as forms of protest associated with such resistance like self-immolation (which till the anti-Mandal agitation carried the quality of the 'unfamiliar'), are some of the factors which have contributed towards such an imagination.

Within the framework of nationalist narratives, this 'linguistic insubordination' of Tamil Nadu gets written as 'chauvinistic', 'fissiparous' and 'divisive'. For instance, when Jawaharlal Nehru, as the prime minister of India, spoke against the call by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam during the late 1950s against Hindi, he was full of anxiety about the so-called national unity: "Mr Nehru warned that the campaign of disunity was doing injury to the country and harming the progress of Madras state. He appealed to the Tamil people not to follow this unhappy path which would destroy them. They should instead work for the building up of a strong united, progressive and prosperous India" [Ramanujam 1967:47]. Similarly, T N Seshan's controversial biography refers to the anti-Hindi agitation of 1965 as "a fissiparous agitation in the name of language" [Kutty 1994:85]. The ontological primacy given to 'nation' in such narratives invests the language issue with a singular connotation, i e, as against the nation, and denies its other possible connotations. Importantly, this containment of meaning makes the language issue available for 'correction' by the homogenising nation-state.

Within this broad context, the present set of notes has a limited agenda: it intends to free the language question in Tamil Nadu from its nationalist reading and to recover the surplus of connotations which are refused within such a reading. This is done through a recounting of the pre-1947 career of the language debate in the Tamil-speaking region. In doing so, I argue that 'Tamil' emerged within the discursive field of the early Dravidian movement as a site for a 'national-popular' project by encompassing a range of democratic concerns connected with caste, gender and region, and involving different subaltern groups.[1] In other words, in the early Dravidian movement's engagement, the language issue attempted to break the people-intellectual separation which was affirmed by the brahmin orthodoxy in Tamil Nadu through Sanskrit, the sacradotal language, and English, the language of colonial governance. This disarticulation between the intellectuals and the people/nation, which was contested by the Dravidian movement by privileging a refashioned Tamil, stood against the possibility of the 'national-popular'.

II
Sanskrit, English and Brahmin Hegemony[2]

Though the brahmins constituted only a little over 3 per cent of the total population in the Madras Presidency, their control over the Madras administration in terms of high-paid jobs with substantial bureaucratic authority was almost monopolistic [Suntharalingam 1980:123; Arooran 1980:38; Irschick 1969:13-16,42]. However, what was at issue in the Tamil political context was not merely their excessive control over the colonial structures of authority; but, more importantly, their stubborn refusal to constitute a modern subjectivity for themselves in the new context: "The upper castes, especially the brahmins found that their intelligence and application brought them rich rewards but at the same time did not entail any obligation which would run counter to their traditional ways of living. They could live comfortably in two worlds, the secularised, modernised atmosphere of their places of work which did not affect their everyday domestic and social life. The law along with teaching and civil service were professions which they could well adopt and yet not infringe their caste or ritual prohibitions" [Srinivasan 1970:184]. In other words, the Janus-faced existence of the brahmin meant that he now combined his pre-existing hegemony in the indigenous society exercised through caste and religion, with his new-found authority in the colonial 'political society' – each spilling into the other. This tightly-woven configuration of power in the hands of the brahmin was a legitimate moment of anxiety for others; and it came out in all its sharpness during the controversy surrounding the elevation of Muthuswamy Iyer to a judgeship at the Madras high court.[3] When 'A Dravidian correspondent', contesting the appointment of Iyer, argued in the columns of *Madras Mail* (September 5, 1878) that the brahmin was "least fitted of all castes to deal fairly with the masses... since he considers himself as a god and all others as Mlechhas" [Suntharalingam 1980:153], he was not only questioning the appointment *per se*, but also the new coalescence of different domains of authority in the brahmin under colonialism.

Intimately linked to the hegemonic location of the brahmin both in the pre-existing indigenous sphere and the colonial political society was his bilinguality. This bilinguality was distinguished by its contempt for Tamil, the language of the masses, and its simultaneous enthusiasm for English and Sanskrit, both languages of exclusion, and hence, of power: "They spoke a colloquial Tamil brahmin dialect, a slang, at home; and impeccable English in office and from public fora; they praised Sanskrit and learnt enough to make a local show of it. They disdained to speak in their mother tongue on public occasions and never felt ashamed to admit that they could not express themselves sufficiently well in Tamil. Some of them became noted great orators in English but none of them could speak a single sentence in Tamil without using a high percentage of English words or loading it with a still higher percentage of Sanskrit. They know the Sanskrit lore, became soaked in western intellectual tradition but remained totally ignorant of Tamil literary and cultural traditions" [Subramaniam 1989:94]. The reason for this particular kind of bilinguality of the brahmin is not far to seek. While English facilitated his access to and authority in the colonial 'political society', Sanskrit, which was celebrated as 'Deva Bhasha' or the language of the celestials, reinforced his hegemony in the indigenous society.

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If access to authority was the meaning of this bilinguality for the brahmin, it simultaneously meant exclusion and disempowerment for the Tamil-speaking monolingual subaltern. For instance, Gnanambal, the woman protagonist of *Pradhabha Muthaliar Charitram*, which is credited to be the first Tamil novel, talks *in extenso* of the implications of conducting court proceedings in English for the ordinary Tamilian; and concludes, "They return back home without any gain like a blind man who went to watch theatre and like a deaf man who went to listen to music" [Vedanayagam Pillai 1984:302].[4] Being ideologically constituted as the embodiment of brahminical Hinduness,[5] the exclusion based on Sanskrit was more intense and overlaid with the politics of caste. Sanskrit schools, both government-funded as well as those supported by temple endowments, denied by and large admission to non-brahmin students [Varadarajulu Naidu 1991:21-22; Thirunavukarasu 1991:69-72]. The brahmin orthodoxy, in affirming the sacradotal status of Sanskrit, simultaneously inferiorised Tamil. Their resistance to conducting Temple 'archanas' in Tamil [Harrison 1960:130-31][6] and their claim that Tamil language and literature were mere derivatives of Sanskrit, an argument which goes back at least to Subramania Diksitar of 17th century [Thirumaran 1992:80] were some of the modes through which the brahmins affirmed the sacradotal quality of Sanskrit and at once, inferiorised Tamil. As recently as early 1940s, when Thandapani Desikar sang in Tamil during the Tiruvayaaru music festival, the next singer, a brahmin, refused to sing unless the dais was purified with water and cowdung. And of course, the dais was purified to facilitate his singing.

With the arrival of Indian nationalism, which privileged in more than one way the subject position of the upper caste Hindu male, sanskrit acquired a new connotation and became the sign of Indianness. Theosophical Society started Sanskrit schools in Madras city as well as in other parts of the presidency such as Madurai, Bellary, Nellore, Vizianagaram, Trichinopoly and Guntur, and in founding the Adayar Oriental Library, it attempted a 'national Sanskrit movement' [Suntharalingam 1980:303]. What began under Col H S Olcott in the late 19th century, continued with new vigour under Annie Besant through the early 20th century [Arooran 1980:46], and earned her the dubious appellation 'Irish Brahmani'.

In this new context of nationalism, brahmin nationalist leaders extolled the virtues of Sanskrit, unmindful of its exclusionary dynamics. For instance, P S Sivasamy Iyer, in his convocation address to the University of Madras in 1914, lent his able oratory for the cause of Sanskrit thus:

> If, in the opinion of the most cultivated and thoughtful mind of Europe, the classics have an important place in a scheme of liberal culture, is it too much for claim a place of at least equal prominence to Sanskrit, a language which for flexibility as an instrument of thought and for vocal charm may challenge comparison with any in the world, and can boast of literature containing precious treasures of thought, imagination, beauty and wisdom. As the language which enshrines the highest ideas of Indo-Aryan civilisation, as the language in which the highest achievement of the Hindu mind in the region of philosophic speculation and religion have been recorded, as the language to which most of what is in the vernacular literatures of India owes its inspiration, and as the language in which the ordinances that regulate our social life and institutions to this day have been written, a knowledge of it is an essential element of culture to every Hindu... (*New India*, November 19, 1914).

We need to bear in mind here that Sivasamy Iyer was addressing a convocation of the Madras University and not an audience owing allegiance to Sanskritic Hinduism. His reference to "our social life" did no doubt exclude all those in the audience whose religion was non-Sanskritic Hinduism or non-Hinduism. As much as Sivasamy Iyer, other nationalists such as S Satyamurthy and C Rajagopalachari too held similar opinion about Sanskrit. For Satyamurthi, Sanskrit gave "a true culture, a real intellectual pleasure and a disciplined mind" [Arooran 1980:99n]; and for Rajagopalachari, Sanskrit is necessary for 'cultural perfection' [Bharati 1937:11]. Interestingly, *Eminent Orientalists: Indian, European, American*, an edited volume brought out by the well known nationalist publisher from Madras, G A Natesan, carried accounts of 25 orientalist scholars including William Jones, Henry H Colebrook, Monier Williams, Max Muller and Paul Deussen, and it ignored totally all those who worked for the revival of Tamil such as Peter Percival, Winlow, G U Pope and Robert Caldwell![7]

In short, the bilinguality of the brahmin in colonial Tamil Nadu, particularly his valorisation of Sanskrit, was marked by the logic of exclusion, an exclusion which, in Gramscian terms, meant the unconnectedness of the intellectuals with the people/nation. In fact, the scenario was rather similar to what Gramsci wrote of the Italian intellectuals of the 1930s:

> In Italy the term 'national' has an ideologically very restricted meaning, and does not in any case coincide with 'popular' because in Italy the intellectuals are distant from the people, i e, from the 'nation'. They are tied instead to a caste tradition that has never been broken by a strong popular or national political movement from below... The current term 'national' is connected in Italy to this intellectual and bookish tradition. Hence the foolish and ultimately dangerous facility of calling 'anti-national' whoever does not have this archaeological and moth-eaten conception of the country's interest [Gramsci 1985:208].

III
Nationalism and Incomplete Appropriation of Tamil

With Indian nationalism entering its mass-mobilisation phase during the 1910s, the leadership of the Tamil Nadu Congress, though dominated by the brahmins, could not shut out Tamil fully. The need to appropriate Tamil for the cause of nationalism was accentuated, in addition, by the arrival of the non-brahmin movement in the form of the Justice Party in 1916. Significantly, the decisions to fight the Justice Party and to employ Tamil for nationalist propaganda were taken together by the Congress leadership. As P Varadarajulu Naidu recounted the story,

> It was in August 1916...that Dr T S S Rajan, the late Mr V O Chidambaram Pillai, Mr C Rajagopalachariar and myself, met at the residence of Mr Rajagopalachariar at Salem. After discussing the then political and communal [an allusion to the politics of the Justice Party] situation in South India for over three hours between 9 and 12 O'clock in the night, we decided to stand together...The outcome of our midnight and historic meeting was the formation of the Madras Presidency Association in 1917 to fight the Justice Party, the campaign against Dr Annie Besant and the first attempt made to carry on political propaganda in the Tamil language [Anonymous 1948:6].

Though both the brahmins and the non-brahmins in the Congress leadership participated in this project of employing Tamil for nationalist mobilisation, it was the non-brahmins who showed greater enthusiasm. During the Home Rule Movement, Varadarajulu Naidu declared, "I have felt that for the national uplift and the attainment of real and enduring Home Rule in India, the political concepts, aims and methods of work which have hitherto been the exclusive possession of English educated people should be brought within the familiar reach of people at large, through the medium of their mother tongue" [Irschick 1969:306]. Similarly, in 1919, S Somasundara Bharati got a resolution passed in a Congress meeting that speeches at political meetings should be made in Tamil instead of in English. There was a number of other non-brahmin leaders who were part of this Tamil-enthusiast nationalist band: while Thiru Vi Kalyanasundara Mudaliar radicalised Tamil journalism through *Desabhaktan* and *Navasakthi*, V O Chidambaram Pillai of

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Swadeshi Movement fame, was an equally important figure in this respect.

In contrast, the brahmin leaders of the Tamil Nadu Congress, even while instrumentally using Tamil for political mobilisation, refused to let go their attachment to Sanskrit. While S Satyamurthy and V V S Iyer used a hybrid Tamil with lots of Sanskrit words (which had Tamil equivalents in popular usage), the brahmin-run nationalist daily *Swadeshamitran* (unlike Thiru Vi Kalyanasundar Mudaliar's *Desabhaktan*) employed a large number of Sankrit and English words [Diraviyam 1974:120, 141-43, 146]. Satyamurthy went to the extent of defending his hybrid Tamil as the most effective political language. More importantly, this refusal to abandon Sanskrit manifested acutely during critical junctures like the debate on the coining of scientific terms in Tamil. In such contexts, they stood on the side of Sanskrit [Irschick 1969:305; Nuhuman 1985:158]. In other words, though the Indian nationalism's need to mobilise the masses by employing their mother tongue did create breaches in the boundary between brahmin/Sanskrit and non-brahmin/Tamil binary, such breaches were insufficient to erase the old divide.

Perhaps an interesting illustration of this continuing divide between the brahmins and the non-brahmins on the language issue would be the encounter between Subramania Bharati and V O Chidambaram Pillai. While Bharati argued that Tamil script should include new symbols to enable foreign names to be written in their original form, Chidambaram Pillai posed, "Everyone of those who have thus far proposed the reform of Tamil script has some link or the other with Sanskrit and why they have not proposed similar reforms in the script for Sanskrit" [Venkatachalapathy 1996:141]. While both were part of the nationalist formation in Tamil Nadu and showed great passion for Tamil, Bharati was a brahmin and Chidambaram Pillai, a non-brahmin.

Strikingly, a number of these non-brahmin Tamil enthusiasts within the Congress got estranged with Congressite nationalism either on the question of caste or language – both of which, as we have seen, were closely linked in the Tamil context. Varadarajulu Naidu left the Congress in 1928 protesting against the separate dining arrangements for the brahmin and non-brahmin students practised in the Seranmadevi Gurukulam, a national school partly funded by the Congress. Somasundara Bharati joined the anti-Hindi agitation of the late 1930s opposing Rajagopalachari's decision to introduce Hindi in schools. Thiru Vi Kalyanasundara Mudaliar aligned himself with the non-brahmin movement on an anti-Hindi platform in the 1940s. Chidambaram Pillai, during his last days, left the Congress and joined the non-brahmin movement.

IV
Reinscribing Tamil: Towards 'National-Popular'

The Self-Respect Movement, which was formed as part of the revolt against the Indian National Congress's unwillingness to address the issue of caste-based oppression in the Tamil region, took a self-consciously active role in problematising the exclusionary politics of Sanskrit.[8] The founder of the Self-Respect Movement, E V Ramasamy (who interestingly carried the appellation of an anti-national all through his non-Congress career) and his close associates like Kootusi Guruswamy engaged themselves in a sustained critique of Sanskrit's claim to superior forms of knowledge/culture.

This critique primarily proceeded from a rational-utilitarian premise of what different languages are capable of in negotiating the current situation of powerlessness which marked the social life of the Tamil masses. In 1939, when Hindi was a burning issue in the Tamil-speaking region, E V Ramasamy outlined his stance on language question thus:

> I do not have any attachment to the Tamil language for [the reason] that it is my mother tongue or the tongue of the nation. I am not attached to it for [the reason] that it is a separate language, ancient language, language spoken by Shiva [or] language created by Agastiyar. I do not have attachment for anything in itself. That will be foolish attachment, foolish adulation. I may have attachment [for something] for its qualities and the benefits such qualities will result in. I don't praise something because it is my language, my nation, my religion...
> If I think my nation is unhelpful for my ideal and cannot [also] be made helpful, I will abandon [it] immediately. Likewise, if I think my language will not benefit my ideals or [will not help] my people to progress [and] live in honour, I will abandon it... [Chidamparanar 1983:214].

Within this framework of reasoning, Sanskrit emerged as a language which denied equality, honour and progress to the subaltern sections of the Tamils – lower castes, women, working people and so on.

One of the central concerns of the Self-Respect Movement's engagement with language question was, of course, caste. In tracing the link between Sanskrit, caste and brahminic Hinduism, E V Ramasamy, for example, queried, "Let us have a look at the harm already done to and will be done to us because of Tamil's association with Sanskrit. Let us take the problem of caste among us. If the Sanskrit word 'jati' is removed from Tamil language, is there any equivalent Tamil word for it. Let the [Tamil] pandits answer. Alas! No word! It is clear that there was no caste system among our people in the ancient days; and it emerged [among us] due to our association with the north. Similarly, [take the example of] words such as 'Divasam', 'Kalyanam', 'Vaikundam', 'Swargam', 'Moksham', 'Naragam', 'Sloka', 'Swaruba'....Aren't they Sanskrit words? Are they Tamil words? Have we got enlightened because of these words? Or, have we lost our power of reasoning?..." [Aanaimuthu 1974:II, 969]. In other words, the Self-Respect Movement inverted the brahmin/nationalist construction of Sanskrit as a sign of superior culture and reinscribed it as a field of cultural production introducing and legitimising inequalities based on Hinduism and its caste system.

In popularising this non-elite reading of Sanskrit among the broad masses, the movement, among other things, set aflame in public Sanskritic texts which endorsed caste, particularly *Manusmriti*. Expectedly, it led to much despair among the brahmin nationalists; and Rajagopalachari, for instance, referred to such book-burning as "suicidal crusade against the language, literature, the customs and the sacred books of Sanskrit" [Irschick 1969:339]. Importantly, such campaign did succeed in creating a broad consensus among the non-brahmin intelligentsia in Tamil Nadu about the connectedness of Sanskrit with caste-based oppression. Most of the pamphlets brought out during the anti-Hindi agitation of the late 1930s repeatedly referred to such a connection. As one of these pamphlets recounted the argument, "'Hindu' 'Matham' [religion] – these two words are Sanskrit words...It is the ignorance of the Tamil people that they call it [Hinduism] their religion...It is this religion that created jati in Tamil Nadu which knew no caste system. It is because Tamilians allowed Sanskrit to influence their lives and fell prey to Hindu religion and superstitious beliefs, they lost their self respect and became [like] beasts..." [Selvarajan, nd:25].

For the Self-Respect Movement, Sanskrit not merely led to the degradation of lower castes, but also of women. Here, the movement targeted for criticism the Sanskritic marriage customs which affirmed women's subordination. As E V Ramasamy argued,

> Only with the arrival of words such as *Thara Mukurtham* and *Kanniga Dhanam*, our women became puppets of their husbands. Only after [the arrival of such words], we landed up with such fathers who advise their daughters, who return after some quarrel with their husbands, that they had been gifted away to their husband and they belong to his place. Can you find an equivalent word for *Kanniga Dhanam* in Tamil? Thiruvalluvar

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called it as *Vazhkkai Thunai* [life partnership]. It only means that husband and wife are friends. What a vast difference in thought... At least, is there a Tamil equivalent for *Pativratha*? This is also a harmful result of our association with Sanskrit... [Aanaimuthu 1974:II, 969-70].

Similarly, in the course of the anti-Hindi propaganda in 1948, he despaired, "How much one had struggled to change *Kanniga Dhanam* into *Vazhkkai Thunnai Oppantham* [contract of life partnership]? How much trouble one was faced with in erasing the word *Mangalya Dharanam*?..." (*Indi Pour Murasu,* 1948:16-17). In keeping with this critique, activists of the movement like Moovalur Rammamirtham Ammiyar used to translate Sanskrit slokas into Tamil during self respect marriages and elaborate how they embodied and reinforced women's subordination to men [Thirunavukkarasu 1991: 171].[9]

The third moment of Self-Respect Movement's critique of Sanskrit was related to the devalued representation of south as a region in Sanskrit texts. Here, *Ramayana* was reread and interpreted as a text celebrating northern imperialism. Harrison (1960: 127-28) sums up rather pointedly this campaign against *Ramayana* by the Dravidian Movement thus:

> The Dravidian argument is based on the very substance of Hindu mythology, and *The Ramayana*, so proudly hailed as a force of synthesis, becomes the basic text cited to establish Aryan inequity. In Dravidian propaganda the southward march of Rama to the lair of evil King Ravana, abductor of Sita, is nothing less than the allegorical story of the triumphal Aryan progress over the original inhabitants of India. To many a non-brahmin Tamil, the legions of monkeys Rama encountered in the southern jungles appear to be none other than the Dravidians... The Dravidian movement rewrites *The Ramayana* to cast Ravana as a Dravidian hero repelling Rama, the invading Aryan generalissimo. Touring dramatic troupes parody the epic... When Rajagopalachari, a brahmin, was chief minister of Madras in 1954, he ordered police to search out the troupes, which were forced to perform in clandestine gatherings, and even took to the All-India Radio to mobilise a 'Ramayana Protection Committee'.[10]

The campaign did not even spare the Tamil version of *Ramayana* written by Kamban. Addressing those who defend *Kamba Ramayanam* on the basis its aesthetic merits, E V Ramasamy noted, "They say [*Kamba*] *Ramayanam* is a rare literature. What is the use? However starved one is, would one pick up food from shit...How can anyone who desire self-respect read Ramayanam?..." [Aanaimuthu 1974:II, 977].

If the Self-Respect Movement's critique of Sanskrit disinvested it of its claim to superiority and recast it as a vehicle for multiple forms of disempowerment, it read English as a language of modernity rather than as one of colonial governance. In defence of English, E V Ramasamy claimed, "We learn about the means to improve our lives from books written in English. In short, it is no exaggeration to say that it is the knowledge of English which kindled the spirit of freedom in our people who had been cherishing enslaved lives. It is English which gave us the knowledge to say 'no' to monarchy and 'yes' to republic; to say 'yes' to socialism and 'no' to *Sanathanam*. It gave us the knowledge that men and women are equals..." [Aanaimuthu 1974:II, 970-1]. He continued, "It is not our Tamil or Sanskrit which came to destroy it, but it is English, which gave us telegraph, electricity, cinema, aircraft, radio and X-ray. Sanskrit enslaved our reason through the superstitions of Shastras, Puranas and Ithihasas. English freed us from such chains of bondage and made us think on the basis of rationality ..." (Ibid:971).

In other words, while English functioned as a form of cultural capital and an instrument to access bureaucratic authority for the upper caste, particularly brahmin, elite, it had a different connotation in the discourse of the Self-Respect Movement. For the movement, it is a carrier of enabling ideas which could be mobilised to interrogate the pre-existing arrangement of power in the Tamil society and to recover a space for subaltern assertion. Such a reading of English was greatly facilitated by the location of the Self-Respect Movement in the Tamil political milieu as not circumscribed by mere anti-colonialism.

Let us now turn to the manner in which the Self-Respect Movement engaged with Tamil. Significantly, the movement did not view the opposition between Sanskrit and Tamil as a pure, absolute opposition. Though Tamil as an embodiment of social relations was better than Sanskrit, it required refashioning so as to free it from a range of social exclusions and disempowering implications inherent in its current form, i e, refashioning Tamil was part of the movement's agenda to negotiate multiple forms of disempowerment faced by the Tamil subaltern classes.

Towards such an agenda, the movement strived hard to dissociate Tamil from its fossilised historicity. In 1943, when separate Dravida Nadu was very much on the agenda of E V Ramasamy, he wrote, "The unnecessary ancient principles of the Tamils...have become useful [only] for deceiving outsiders and plunging [oneself] into foolishness. It has become the duty of the rationalist that such talk [about ancient Tamil ideas] should not be evoked for any reform from now on." He proceeded further: "If several of our 'pundits' do not have rational thinking, it is because of the obscurantism of the ancient Tamil principles. There is nothing at present to be achieved by the talk of ancient Tamils. Therefore it is an important duty of the people not to give any place for such fraudulent speech..." [Aanaimuthu 1974: II, 1251-52]. A striking illustration of E V Ramasamy's contempt for the Tamil past could be his reaction to the glorification of ancient Tamil women by the leaders of the anti-Hindi agitation of the late 1930s. He intervened to tell them: "It will be worth-while if you discuss the present status of women and what can be done about achieving women's freedom, instead of glorifying our grandmothers like Allirani, Kannagi and Madhavi" (*Kudi Arasu*, November 27, 1938).

Thus locating the role of Tamil in the anticipatory, the movement developed a critique of Tamil as embodying retrogressive cultural practices in the present. The cultural practices which drew the utmost attention of the movement were related to religion and gender. The propagandists of the Self-Respect Movement entered into bitter conflicts with the non-brahmin Saivite elites who promoted Tamil as the language of Saivism and Saivite culture as well as with the Tamil pundits who taught the language through the medium of religious texts. Kuthoosi Guruswamy, for instance, critiquing the Tamil pundits, noted, "...They are obsessed with Tamil purism. Other than that, they only know how to teach Tamil literature through Puranas. For instance, while explaining *Kamba Ramayanam,* they teach that Rama is an incarnation of Maha Vishnu, Sita is the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, and Hanuman could lift an entire mountain; and that it is sinful not to believe in all these. On listening to this, can any student understand and enjoy the literary merits of Kamban? Instead the students spend their time worshipping Rama and seeking his blessings" [*Puthuvai Murasu*, October 26, 1931, cited in Velu and Selvaraju 1989:10]. Towards desacralising Tamil, the Self-Respect Movement campaigned against the singing of Saivite hymns in Tamil conferences, teaching religious texts as part of Tamil language courses and carrying invocations to god in textbooks [Velu and Selvaraju 1989]. While the movement encouraged Tamil music, it opposed singing of bhajans in Tamil. Ridiculing the singing of bhajans in Tamil as part of the Tamil music movement, E V Ramasamy commented, "What [good of] bhajans whether they are in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Japanese or German. After all, which language god does not know" [Kesavan 1991:48].

In a similar fashion, the self-respecters criticised Tamil as a bearer of gender inequalities. *Thirukkural* and *Silapathikaram*, two important classical Tamil texts, came in for barbed criticism for they degraded women and denied them equality with men.

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E V Ramasamy characterised *Silapathikaram* as a text "which began in prostitution, grew in 'chastity' and ended up in foolishness and superstition". We may note here that chastity, for him, signified women's unfreedom. Similarly, despite his qualified approval of *Thirukkural*, he subjected it to severe criticism for emphasising women's subordination by glorifying chastity. He noted with contempt that Tamil did not have words for the male counterpart of adulterous and widow. He invented the neologisms *vidavan* for widower and *vibacharan* for those men who visit prostitutes, and suggested their popular use. He also noted that several Tamil words such as *Aanmai* (masculinity) were derogatory to women:

> Women should not forget that the word *aanmai* itself is used in derogation to women... As long as *aanmai* will exist, women's slavery will only grow. It is definite that the emancipation of women will not materialise till women themselves destroy the philosophy of *aanmai*... Freedom, valour and such qualities are made the right of men. Men have decided that these [qualities] belong only to *aanmai*.[11]

Let me now quickly sum up the important points which emerge out of the foregoing account of Self-Respect Movement's engagement with the question of language. First of all, it bared open the exclusionary politics of Sanskrit and its disempowering implications for the lower castes and women. Second, it tried to refashion Tamil as an inclusive cultural field. Finally, this inclusivity was premised on multiple contestations against different forms of oppression based on caste, gender, religion and region.

V
1937: Signs of the 'National-Popular'

The decade-long propaganda by the Self-Respect Movement in recasting the language issue as a site for disempowered social groups to articulate their politics of emancipation, showed signs of success in 1937. As is well known, in 1937 the Congress ministry headed by C Rajagopalachari introduced compulsory study of Hindi in schools in the Madras presidency. Though Hindi was presented as the national language, its introduction in schools was defended by the Congress leadership in terms of its closeness to Sanskrit and the possiblitiy of having access to northern Hindu religious texts. Rajagopalachari claimed that Hindi would, among other things, help in learning Sanskrit and reading Tulsi Ramayana. The brahmin-controlled press too used the occasion to plead for Sanskrit. For instance, *Ananda Vikatan* (October 17, 1937) not only defended the introduction of Hindi in schools, but also asked the government to introduce Sanskrit in higher classes as an optional course [Ramasamy 1974:2]. The agitation launched by the Self-Respect Movement against Hindi continued from 1937 to 1940 and finally succeeded in evicting it from schools.

As we have noted elsewhere in the paper, a large number of anti-Hindi pamphlets published during the agitation, though most often not by self-respecters themselves, spoke of the connection between caste and Sanskrit as well as the degrading marriage rituals brought in by Sanskritic Hinduism. Surely these are signs of Self-Respect Movement's stance on language gaining the quality of common sense. Also the agitation drew large numbers of people. While an anti-Hindi meeting in Madras held on June 26, 1938 witnessed a gathering of 50,000 people, a similar meeting in Viruthunagar held on July 10, 1938 attracted 10,000 people. About 5,00,000 people in total participated in 87 such meetings organised in the mofussil areas of Tamil Nadu [Kesavan 1991: 66]. Significantly, a large number of the participants in the agitation were drawn from the subaltern stratas of the Tamils, thus adding a national-popular character to it. Among other things, the presidency magistrate's reason for denying rice diet to the anti-Hindi prisoners brings out this fact candidly. As he noted,

> It is a fact that rice diet was refused to picketers who were sentenced. It was clear after a series of batches of picketers were enquired that they were persons having no ostensible means of livelihood and they were being seduced to go over to Madras to commit acts in violation of law and then prefer to go to jail. Even though in every case there was an offer made to them by me to release them under section 562 Cr P C, in order that they may attend to their normal avocations, they refused to execute bonds and preferred to go to jail and when sentenced batch after batch had only one request to make, viz, that they wanted rice diet. It looked as if they had been sent with the hope that they would be given rice diet and that the inconvenience to them was less compared with the embarrassment to government. As it was the rice diet that seemed to be the main inducement to them I declined to give it in order to deter other picketers coming in. They did not also deserve rice diet.[12]

What the presidency magistrate failed to mention was the fact that denial of rice diet did not stop the anti-Hindi picketing. It rather became more intense. We need to bear in mind here that though a large number of self-respecters volunteered to particpate in the agitation, the movement instructed only those who could pay their train fare and bring their own clothes to join the picketing [Irayan 1981:108].

Like the volunteers, even the new leaders who emerged through the agitation were drawn from the ranks of the ordinary. The case of Swami Arunagiri Nathar is rather instructive here. The official characterisation of Arunagiri Nathar ran as follows:

> He indulged in such scurrilous attack against the Premier's character and actions that I came to the conclusion...that none but a person of very depraved character was capable of indulging in such abuse of others at a public meeting. It was quite clear from his speeches that the title of swami assumed by him as well as his holy garb were only cloaks covering up a wicked nature...The [police] report received was to the effect that the petitioner was an itinerant preacher with no fixed place of residence. He came to notice recently in the anti-Hindi movement. He was then staying in a mutt on the Thiruvattiyur High Road. Beyond this nothing is known of his status...The sub inspector wrote that from his enquiries, he found the man's habits and associations were of low order...[13]

Importantly, Arunagiri Nathar's so-called scurrilous attack was framed in terms of anti-brahminism; and the songs he wrote against Hindi, which inspired a large number of anti-Hindi volunteers, contained all the ingredients of Self-Respect Movement's stance on Sanskrit.

In keeping with this trend of large-scale subaltern participation in the agitation, the first anti-Hindi volunteer to die in prison was L Natarajan, an Adi Dravida. Reporting his death in the Madras legislative council, Rajagopalachari referred to him as "an illiterate harijan". His illiteracy came to signify for Rajagopalachari and other nationalists the illegitimacy of the anti-Hindi agitation – as the following snatch of discussion that took place in the Madras legislative council shows:

> Sri K V R Swami: "How did this illiterate man who had no knowledge of even his mother tongue happen to take part in the anti-Hindi movement?"
> The Hon Sri C Rajagopalachariar: "A very interesting and relevant question, Sir, but the government cannot answer it."
> Abdul Hameed Khan Sahib Bhahadur: "May I know, Sir, whether it was due to his illiteracy that he got this illness?"
> The Hon Sri C Rajagopalachariar: "It was due to his illiteracy that he picketed and it was due to his picketing that he happened to be in the jail, but his illness was certainly due to other causes" (Laughter).[14]

While Rajagopalachari and other nationalists foregrounded the connection between language and literacy/scholarship/knowledge, what they refused to acknowledge was that language was a question of power. What escaped their attention was that langauge issue in the region has already emerged as a site for the subaltern classes to articulate their emancipatory desires by problematising disempowerments based on caste, gender and region, and not merely the

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desire for literacy. Responding to Rajagopalachari's comments, *The Justice*, an ally of the Self-Respect Movement, wrote, "What the premier obviously wanted to suggest was that opposition to cumpulsory Hindi from illiterates need not be treated with any respect or consideration. This is not a right attitude for a government, which claims to be popular, to take..." (*The Justice*, January 25, 1939).

Not lagging behind these ordinary men, a large number of ordinary women also took part in the anti-Hindi agitation. In all, 73 women were arrested and jailed for their involvement in the agitation. Several of them went to jail with their children. An exasperated member of the Congress ministry, T S S Rajan, the minister for public health, commented that women were getting arrested to get milk for their children in jail [Anandhi 1992: 199]. While E V Ramasamy was jailed for inciting women to participate in the agitation, it was a women's conference which gave him the title 'Periyar' or the 'great one' as he was languishing in jail. What needs to be kept in mind here is that, unlike the Congress, the politics of the Self-Respect Movement never carried the middle class stamp of respectability; and even so all these women found it worthwhile to lend their participation to the anti-Hindi agitation.

The participation in the anti-Hindi agitation by such subordinate sections as the sudras, Adi-Dravidas, women and illiterates was in conformity with the manner in which language issue was addressed by the Self-Respect Movement as an element in the politics of empowerment. The emergence of such an historic bloc based on a spectrum of subalternities, however transient it had been, was a moment of national-popular will finding its articulation.

Writing of the need for an unified language for the nation so that an "organic unity between theory and practice, between intellectual strata and popular masses, between rulers and the ruled" gets established, Gramsci notes, "What this language will be, one cannot foresee or establish: in any case, if the intervention [for such a language] is 'rational', it will be organically tied to tradition, and this is of no small importance in the economy of culture" [Gramsci quoted in Forgacs 1993: 188]. For Gramsci, tradition here stands for the connectedness with the people. The Self-Respect Movement's politics around Sanskrit and Tamil, recounted in the preceding sections, may be viewed as a search for such a language. The career of this search was marked by new ways of interrogating and reconstituting pre-existing relations of authority and subordination in the Tamil society; and held out, as a consequence, possiblities of forging a broad historic bloc with the agenda of reordering the society on a democratic basis. This is central to any national-popular project aiming at overcoming the disarticulation between the 'nation' and the people.

While the nationalist narratives, by reducing the meaning of the language question in Tamil Nadu as singularly anti-national, makes invisible alternate ways of imagining politics based on the national-popular will, it is ironically the voice of the so-called 'anti-national' which recovers such politics for us. At least in the particular historical context of Tamil Nadu.

Notes

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1 For helpful commentaries on Gramsci's concept, national-popular, see Simon (1988:23-24, 42-45) and Forgacs (1993).

2 This section is substantially drawn from Pandian (1994).

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3 For details of the controversy, see Suntharalingam (1980:151-56).

4 In the novel, Gnanambal proceeds further and says, "Whoever learns whatever language, the country of that language is the appropriate place for them. Hence, we shall send those who learn English alone, without learning their mother tongue, to England; those who learn French alone to France. Since Latin and Sanskrit do not have countries of their own, we shall send those who learn these languages to anonymous islands" [Vedanayagam Pillai 1984: 310].

5 According to the late Sankaracharya of the Kancheepuram Mutt, a relentless defender of brahminism, "It is wrong to hold language as superior to religion or god. If it [the defence of Sanskrit] is just for the sake of language, I would say 'no' to Sanskrit. But all the vedas and shastras are found in that language. So I am saying to protect vedas and shastras, we should protect Sanskrit" [Chandrasekerendra Saraswati Sankaracharya 1992:I, 312].

6 During the 1970s, M Karunanidhi, the DMK chief minister of Tamil Nadu, attempted to implement archanas in Tamil, which was resisted, as in the past, by the brahmins. A provoked Karunanidhi announced, "If the right to perform archanas in Tamil is denied, Sanskrit considered as devabhasha [language of Gods], and along with that god and religion also, will be driven out from Tamil Nadu to north India" [Presler 1987:130].

7 The claim that Sanskrit is the means to Indianness continues with vigour even today. In a recent judgment on teaching Sanskrit as elective subject in secondary schools run by the central board of secondary education, the Supreme Court observed, "Without the learning of Sanskrit it is not possible to decipher the Indian philosophy on which our culture and heritage are based". Elaborating further, it noted, "It is well known that Sanskrit is the mother of all Indo-Aryan languages and it is this language in which our vedas, puranas and upanishads have been written and in which Kalidas, Bhavbuti, Banbhatta and Dandi wrote their classics. Teaching of Sankaracharya, Ramanuj, Madhwacharya, Nimbarkand Vallabhacharya would not have been available to them as a medium of expressing their thought" (Santhos Kumar and others vs the secretary, ministry of human resource development 1994).

8 The Self-Respect Movement was launched by E V Ramasamy, after he broke ranks with the Indian National Congress. His active sojourn in the Congress came to an end in November 1925 when two of his resolutions seeking 'communal reservations'(i e, caste-based reservations in favour of the non-brahmins) were disallowed in the Kancheepuram conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress. Thereafter, he declared his political agenda to be 'no god, no religion, no Congress, and no brahmins'. For accounts of the Self-Respect Movement, see Chidamparanar (1983); Visswanathan (1983); Arooran (1980:152-251); Anandhi (1991); Pickering (1993); and Pandian (1993).

9 For details of Rammirtham Ammaiyar's activities in the Self-Respect Movement, see Anandhi (1991b).

10 For more details on the campaign, see Richman (1992).

11 All the details in this paragraph are drawn from Anandhi (1992: Chapter IV).

12 Public (General), GO No 394, dated March 3, 1939, Tamil Nadu Archives.

13 Ibid.

14 Proceedings of the Madras legislative council, January 18, 1939. Significantly, the elite contempt for the participation of illiterate common masses in language agitations continues. Referring to the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation, Kutty (1994:86) writes, "Mobs of illiterate and semi-illiterate Tamil people, mostly poor, lapsed into fits of fury in the cause of so remote a language, English. Hindi was no more foreign to them than English. They were boggled by borrowed visions of domination their leaders conjured up..."

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